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THE END OF

GHOST RIDER

TM

THE SAGA CONCLUDES!

AND LET THERE BE DEATH!

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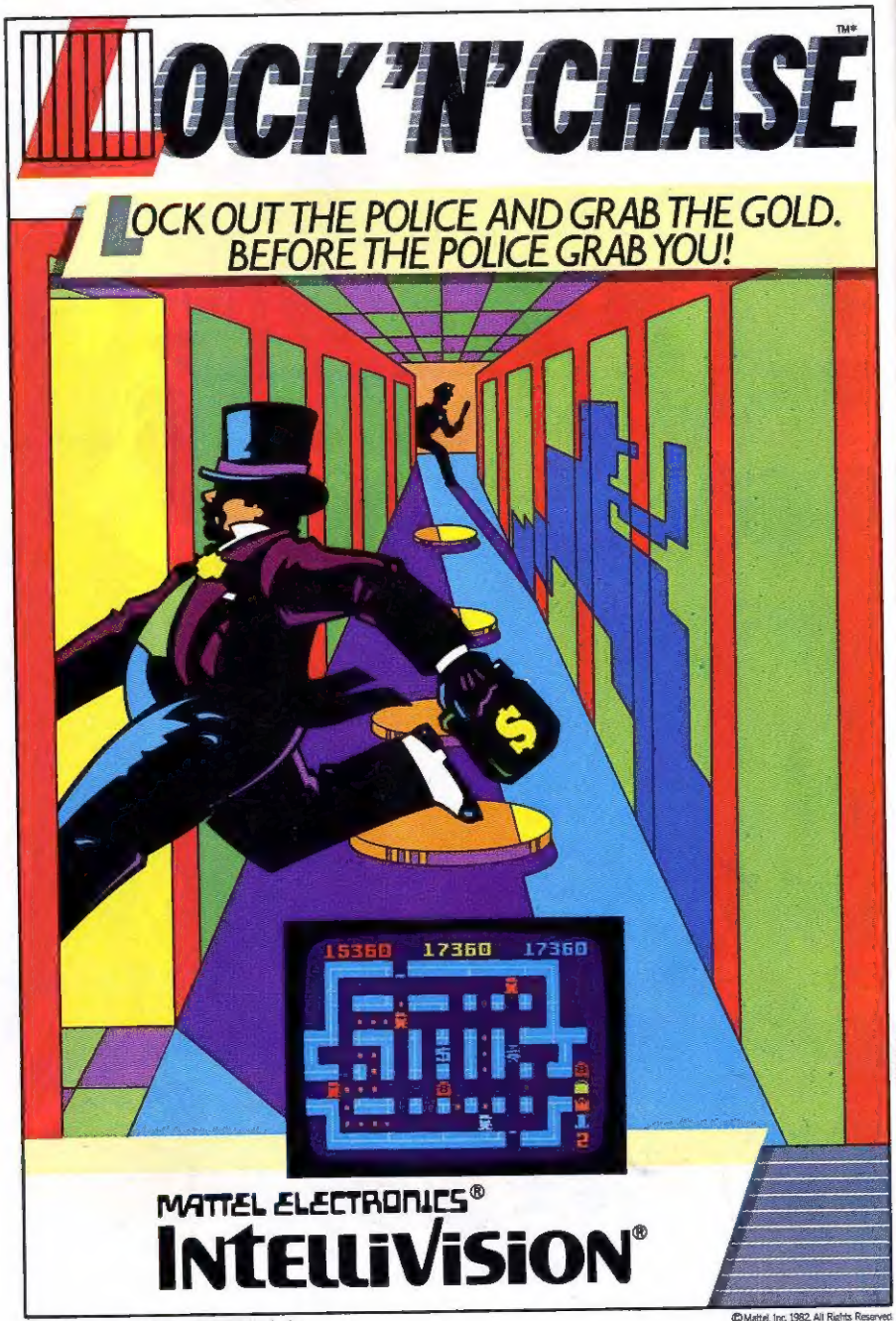
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STAN LEE PRESENTS:
THE END OF THE GHOST RIDER!
IN THE SMALL MIDWESTERN TOWN OF HOLLY-- IN AN UNDISTINGUISHED LITTLE CHURCH STANDS A MAN WITHOUT A SOUL.
HE IS CENTURIOUS-- AND HE HAS KNOWN FEW PLEASURES IN HIS IMMORTAL EXISTENCE. SOLITUDE AND SIN HAVE BEEN HIS MOST INTIMATE COMPANIONS.
BUT TODAY, FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THE DAWN OF THE WORLD-- THE SOULLESS MAN LAUGHS!

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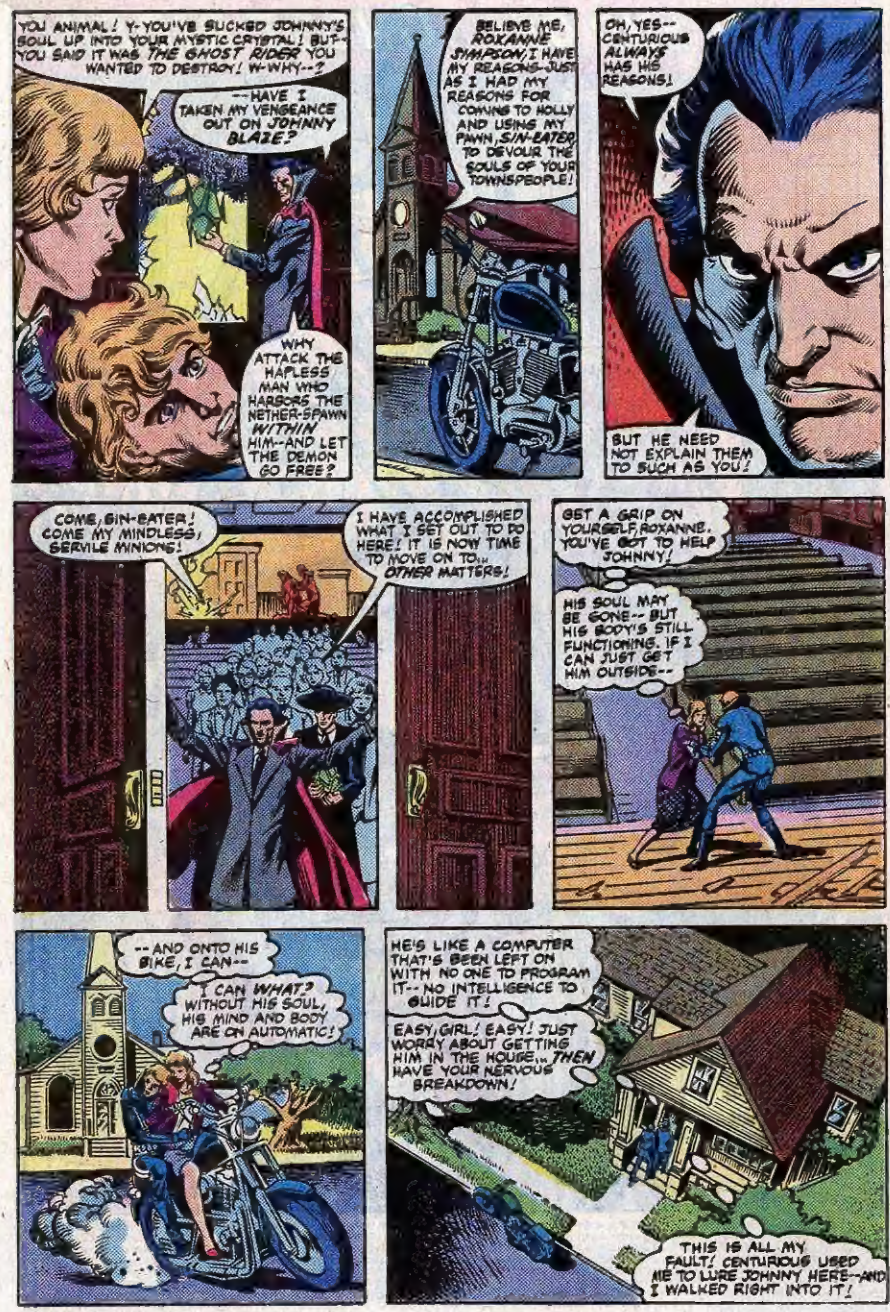
YOU ANIMAL! Y-YOU'VE SUCKED JOHNNY'S SOUL UP INTO YOUR MYSTIC CRYSTAL! BUT-YOU SAID IT WAS THE GHOST RIDER YOU WANTED TO DESTROY! W-WHY--?
--HAVE I TAKEN MY VENGEANCE OUT ON JOHNNY BLAZE?
WHY ATTACK THE HAPLESS MAN WHO HARBORS THE NETHER-SPAWN WITHIN HIM--AND LET THE DEMON GO FREE?
BELIEVE ME, ROXANNE SIMPSON, I HAVE MY REASONS--JUST AS I HAD MY REASONS FOR COMING TO HOLLY AND USING MY PAWN, SIN-EATER TO DEVOUR THE SOULS OF YOUR TOWNSPEOPLE!
OH, YES--CENTURIOUS ALWAYS HAS HIS REASONS!
BUT HE NEED NOT EXPLAIN THEM TO SUCH AS YOU!
COME, SIN-EATER! COME MY MINDLESS, SERVILE MINIONS!
I HAVE ACCOMPLISHED WHAT I SET OUT TO DO HERE! IT IS NOW TIME TO MOVE ON TO... OTHER MATTERS!
GET A GRIP ON YOURSELF, ROXANNE. YOU'VE GOT TO HELP JOHNNY!
HIS SOUL MAY BE GONE--BUT HIS BODY'S STILL FUNCTIONING. IF I CAN JUST GET HIM OUTSIDE--
--AND ONTO HIS BIKE, I CAN--
I CAN WHAT? WITHOUT HIS SOUL, HIS MIND AND BODY ARE ON AUTOMATIC!
HE'S LIKE A COMPUTER THAT'S BEEN LEFT ON WITH NO ONE TO PROGRAM IT--NO INTELLIGENCE TO GUIDE IT!
EASY, GIRL! EASY! JUST WORRY ABOUT GETTING HIM IN THE HOUSE... THEN HAVE YOUR NERVOUS BREAKDOWN!
THIS IS ALL MY FAULT! CENTURIOUS USED ME TO LURE JOHNNY HERE--AND I WALKED RIGHT INTO IT!

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I THOUGHT THERE WAS SOME HOPE BECAUSE CENTURIOUS LEFT ME ALIVE AND WHOLE! BUT HE WOULDN'T HAVE DONE THAT UNLESS HE KNEW I WAS NO THREAT TO HIM!
HEAVEN HELP ME --THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO!

...ZARATHOS, THE GHOST RIDER, WONDERS...
WHAT HAS HAPPENED? I FEEL STRANGELY... DIFFERENT!
THERE ARE NO ACCURSED RESTRAINTS PRESSING UPON ME! I HAVE THIS BODY... TO MYSELF! BLAZE IS NOT HERE!
--HOW CAN THAT BE UNLESS--!

"CENTURIOUS! HE'S MANAGED TO STEAL BLAZE'S SOUL! THE IDIOT-- DOESN'T HE REALIZE WHAT HE'S DONE?
"AH, BUT HE WAS ALWAYS A FOOL --SINCE THE LONG AGO DAY WHEN MEPHISTO FIRST USED HIM TO END MY REIGN OF TERROR ON EARTH!

"CENTURIOUS SACRIFICED HIS SOUL AND BECAME THE TOOL WITH WHICH THE JEALOUS HELL-LORD CAPTURED THE LIVING FLAME THAT IS MY ESSENCE--
'--THUS CONDEMNING ME TO ETERNAL SERVITUDE IN HADES!

"BUT, EVEN AS A SLAVE I GREW TOO POWERFUL TO CONTAIN--AND MEPHISTO STRIPPED ME OF MY MEMORIES--
"--ENTRAPPING ME ON EARTH, IN THE BODY OF JOHNNY BLAZE! BLAZE HAD BROKEN A PACT WITH MEPHISTO--AND OUR CURSED BONDING WAS THAT DEVIL'S WAY OF PUNISHING US BOTH!

"ALL THESE MEMORIES HAD BEEN DENIED ME UNTIL RECENTLY! WHEN I FIRST ENCOUNTERED CENTURIOUS, IN THE LOUISIANA SWAMPS, I DID NOT KNOW THAT HE WAS THE SAME MISCREANT WHO BROUGHT THIS SHAME UPON ME AGES AGO!
"BUT I KNOW NOW! AND WITH BLAZE AT LONG LAST GONE--
*SEE GHOST RIDER #1.

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--SHALL BE MINE!!
NO! NOT THIS! ANYTHING BUT THIS!
WERE MY HEART NOT DANCING WITH DELIGHT, WOMAN--I WOULD STRIKE YOU DOWN WHERE YOU STAND!
BUT ZARATHOS CAN AFFORD TO BE MERCIFUL--WHEN THE FREEDOM THAT HE HAS FOUGHT SO LONG AND HARD FOR--IS AT LONG LAST HIS!
AND, UNLIKE THE ILLUSORY FREEDOMS I HAVE GAINED OF LATE--THIS TIME THERE IS NO BLAZE TO RISE UP FROM WITHIN AND STOP ME!
NO, THIS TIME--THERE IS ONLY ZARATHOS!
THE GHOST RIDER IS FREE!
THERE IS MUCH TO BE DONE! MUCH DEVILTRY TO BE WORKED! BUT BEFORE I ONCE MORE TAKE MY RIGHTFUL PLACE AS MASTER OF HUMANKIND--
--CENTURIOUS MUST PAY THE PRICE!
AS THE CACKLING DEMON ROARS OFF ON HIS MYSTICALLY-CREATED FLAME-CYCLE, ROXANNE SIMPSON MOUNTS JOHNNY BLAZE'S HONDA--AND GIVES CHASE.
SHE'S NOT SURE WHY SHE'S FOLLOWING ZARATHOS--OR WHAT SHE'LL DO IF SHE CATCHES HIM. SHE ONLY KNOWS... SHE MUST TRY.
SIN-EATER, YOUR MINISTRY SHALL SPREAD BEYOND THE CONFINES OF THIS PATHETIC TOWN... PERHAPS TO ULTIMATELY ENCOMPASS THE WORLD.
YOU SHALL SOON COUNT YOUR FOLLOWERS IN THE MILLIONS... AND CENTURIOUS SHALL HAVE SOULS APLENTY TO SUSTAIN HIM! BUT THAT SHALL BE AS NOTHING--COMPARED TO THE SATISFACTION THAT SHALL MOMENTARILY BE MINE!
IS SOMETHING WRONG, PASTOR? YOU LOOK DISTURBED.

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I-IT IS THE CRYSTAL MASTER! IT THROBS! IT PULSES!
"FOR MONTHS NOW I HAVE USED YOU AS A HUMAN CONDUIT FOR MY SOUL CRYSTAL, AND STILL IT FRIGHTENS YOU.
"WELL, STOP YOUR QUAKING, MY FRETFUL FRIEND! WHAT YOU FEEL IS SIMPLY THE GEM... DIGESTING ITS LATEST MORSEL!"
ALL AROUND HIM, A THOUSAND GHOSTLY FACES GAZE OUT AT JOHNNY BLAZE WITH IMPLORING EYES.
A THOUSAND LIPS MOUTH A THOUSAND UNSPOKEN WORDS.
THEN, FROM THE SEA OF WRAITHS--A HAND EMERGES, IT IS ROXANNE'S COUSIN... CHARLIE WINSLOW, OR AT LEAST A FADING REMNANT OF WHAT CHARLIE ONCE WAS.
SOON, HIS THOUGHTS WHISPER, THE GEM WILL BEGIN TO EAT AWAY AT YOUR SOUL. YOUR MIND ITSELF WILL LOSE SUBSTANCE.
EVERYTHING YOU HAVE EVER CALLED YOURSELF... WILL BE PULLED APART LIKE SO MUCH GOSSAMER...
...UNTIL THERE IS NOTHING LEFT...
MEANWHILE,
M-MASTER! OH, MY HEAVENS! MASTER... LOOK!
I HAVE BEEN... EXPECTING HIM, SIN-EATER.

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CENTURIOUS!
SHOOM
MASTER!
SHOOOSH
YOU MADE A FATAL ERROR, FOOL! YOU HAVE ENTRAPPED THE MAN-- AND SET THE MONSTER FREE!
AND THIS MONSTER MEANS TO DESTROY YOU, CENTURIOUS! ZARATHOS SHALL GNAW ON YOUR BONES-- THEN SPIT THEM TO THE DOGS!
YOU FORGOT THAT YOUR HELLFIRE IS USELESS AGAINST A MAN WITHOUT A SOUL, ZARATHOS-- JUST AS YOU FORGET THAT CENTURIOUS COMMANDS THE VERY ELEMENTS!
YOU PLAY WITH THE WIND-- AND USE IT TO TOSS TOYS AT ME?
I AM NOT IMPRESSED!

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WHEN WE LAST BATTLED YOU LIKENED ZARATHOS TO AN ANGRY CHILD!*
SLAM
*LAST ISSUE.
BUT NOW THAT YOU HANG LIKE A BATTERED DOLL IN MY HANDS, CENTURIOUS, TELL ME: WHO IS THE CHILD--
--AND WHO THE MASTER?!
CAN YOU SEE, CENTURIOUS-- HOW EVEN YOUR MINDLESS PUPPETS GAZE UP AT ME IN WORDLESS AWE?
THEY UNDERSTAND THAT-- ONCE I HAVE THROWN YOU TO THE GROUND, AND USED MY HELL-CYCLE TO GRIND YOUR BONES TO DUST--
"...THEY SHALL ALL BE BENDING KNEE TO ME-- ZARATHOS: THE GHOST RIDER-- ZARATHOS, THE--!!
--GOD?
WH-WHAT IS HAPPENING? I FEEL SO... STRANGE...SO...

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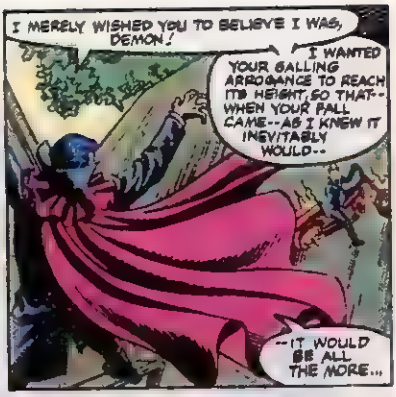
I MERELY WISHED YOU TO BELIEVE I WAS, DEMON!
I WANTED YOUR GALLING ARROGANCE TO REACH ITS HEIGHT, SO THAT-- WHEN YOUR FALL CAME--AS I KNEW IT INEVITABLY WOULD--
--IT WOULD BE ALL THE MORE...

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I AM SICK TO DEATH OF YOUR PRATTLING!
NO! THIS IS-- IMPOSSIBLE YOU HAVE CALLED UP A WIND--
--AND EXTINGUISHED MY FLAME-CYCLE!
I THOUGHT I ORDERED YOU--
BASH
--TO SHUT--
--UP!!!
THE GHOST RIDER FALLS BACK AMONGST THE PEWS, COLLAPSING INTO A TWISTED HEAP OF MANGLED FLAMING BONES.
THE DOLLEST MAN HOOD HIS HEAD IN APPROVAL
CENTURIOUS PIVOTS, STRIDES WITH DIGNITY-- OUT THROUGH THE CHURCH DOORS..
.. AND ROARS HIS TRIUMPH TO THE WANING SUN!
N-N-NO... CENTURIOUS.
..YOU... H-HAVEN'T WON... YET...
INDEED I HAVE, DEMON--
--YOU ARE SIMPLY TOO STUPID TO RECOGNIZE THAT FACT.

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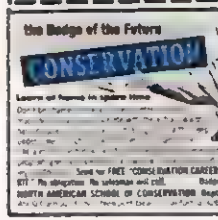

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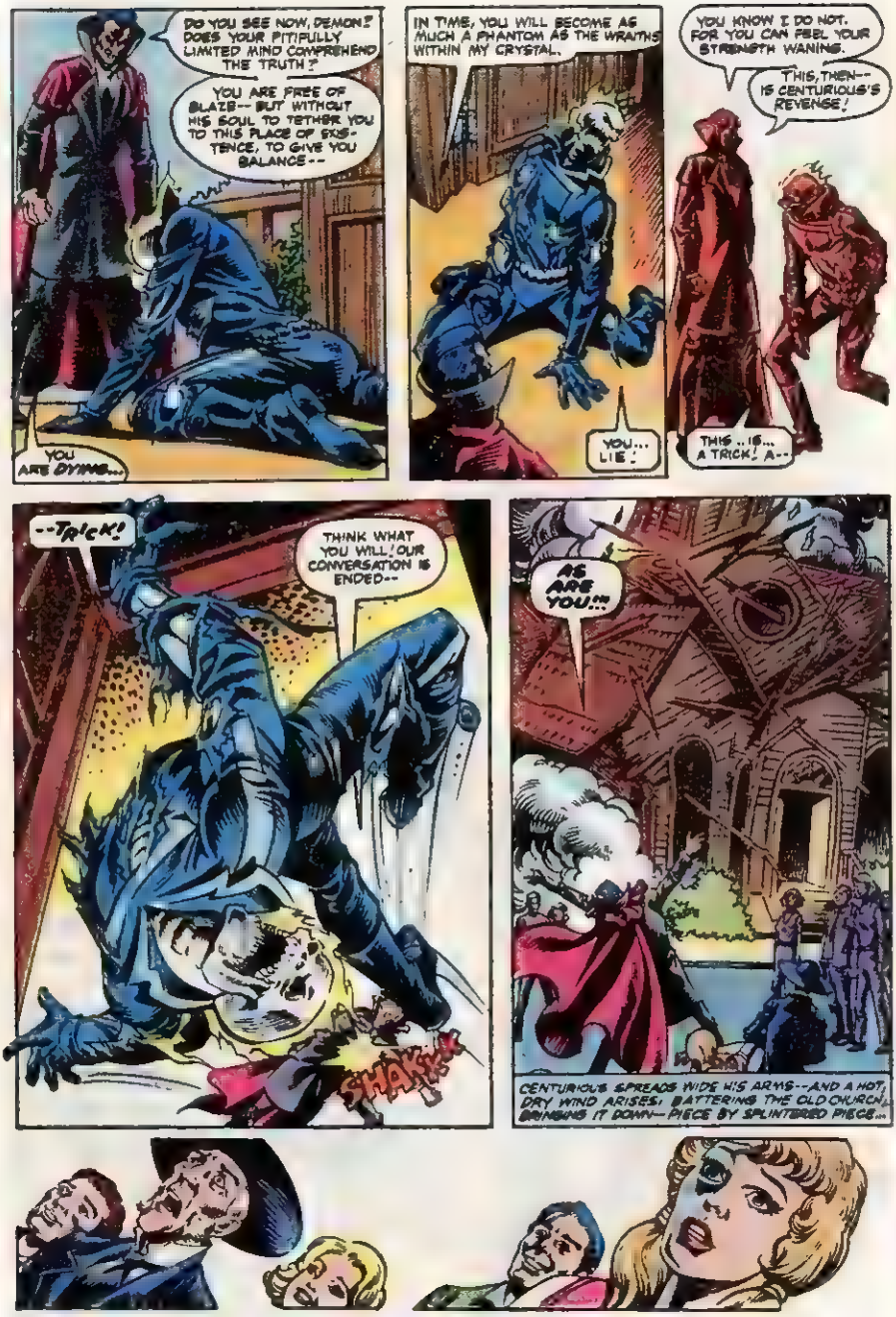
DO YOU SEE NOW, DEMON? DOES YOUR PITIFULLY LIMITED MIND COMPREHEND THE TRUTH?
YOU ARE FREE OF BLAZE-- BUT WITHOUT HIS SOUL TO TETHER YOU TO THIS PLACE OF EXISTENCE, TO GIVE YOU BALANCE--
YOU ARE DYING...
IN TIME, YOU WILL BECOME AS MUCH A PHANTOM AS THE WRAITHS WITHIN MY CRYSTAL.
YOU... LIE!
YOU KNOW I DO NOT. FOR YOU CAN FEEL YOUR STRENGTH WANING.
THIS, THEN-- IS CENTURIOUS'S REVENGE!
THIS ..IS... A TRICK! A--
--TRICK!
THINK WHAT YOU WILL! OUR CONVERSATION IS ENDED--
SHAK
AS ARE YOU...!!!
CENTURIOUS SPREADS WIDE HIS ARMS--AND A HOT, DRY WIND ARISES, BATTERING THE OLD CHURCH, BRINGING IT DOWN-- PIECE BY SPLINTERED PIECE...

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MISS SIMPSON. THOUSANDS OF YEARS BEFORE YOUR BIRTH, I KNEW A LOVE NOT UNLIKE THAT WHICH YOU AND BLAZE ONCE SHARED. TO SPARE MY BELOVED FROM ZARATHOS'S TOUCH, I SACRIFICED MY VERY SOUL--AND LOST EVEN THE ABILITY TO FEEL LOVE.
BUT CENTURIOUS STILL REMEMBERS.
IN REVERENCE FOR THOSE MEMORIES--I SHALL LET YOU LIVE
I GO NOW, WITH MY CRYSTAL AND MY FLOCK-- OFFERING SALVATION TO THE IGNORANT, THE DESPERATE.. AND GRANTING THEM INSTEAD, OBLIVION.
--OBLIVION?
WITH ZARATHOS DESTROYED, NOT EVEN THE LUST FOR VENGEANCE CAN GIVE CENTURIOUS'S LIFE A HINT OF MEANING. I KNOW ONLY MY OWN CORRUPTION.. MY OWN EMPTINESS
COME SIN-EATER--
"-- THE CRUSADE AWAITS--
THE CARAVAN MOVES ON-- DOZENS OF CARS AND TRUCKS GUIDED BY HOLLOW-EYED DRIVERS WHO LEAVE BEHIND A TOWN AS DEVOID OF SOUL AS THEY.
ROXANNE SIMPSON SITS ALONE AMIDST THE WRECKAGE--AMIDST THE DUST AND MEMORIES...
SHE HAS LOST EVERYTHING THIS DAY.
THUNK
HER HOME. HER FAMILY
KREEEEEEE
THE MAN. SHE NOW REALIZES SHE HAS NEVER STOPPED LOVING. EVERYTHING.
EVERYTHING--?

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CENTURIOUS...
CRK...
KLAT'ER
YOU'RE ALIVE? YOU'RE ALIVE!
...RIOUS
ZARATHOS IGNORES THE HUMAN.
HE REACHES OUT A TREMBLING SKELETAL HAND. CALLS UP HIS DARK HATREDS
...AND WATCHES THUNDERSTRUCK
AS THEY FADE AWAY
NOT EVEN THE STRENGTH...TO DO THIS.
MY FLAME-CYCLE...I MUST--
LISTEN TO ME GHOST RIDER. YOU'RE DYING.
NO
YES, AND THERE'S ONE MAN YOU'RE GOING TO LIVE
NO!
YES! YOU HAVE TO FIND A WAY--TO GET JOHNNY BLAZE! YOU NEED HIM.
NO!
NOOOOOO

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I NEVER NEEDED HIM.
I NEED HIM.
THE GUN SEES
CENTURIOUS
JOHNNY...!
LATER THE MOON HANGS IN THE SKY,
BUT EVEN INSECTS HAVE
SAVE FOR WHAT INSTILLED IN THEM—BY THEIR LORD AND
MY BATTLE WITH THE GHOST RIDER HAD
DRAINED ME -- BUT WE MAY PROCEED NOW
THAT I HAVE DRAWN STRENGTH FROM THE
CRYSTAL OF SOULS.
PREPARE YOUR FLOCK, PASTOR DOMBLUE. SIN EATER'S
TRAVELLING SALVATION SHOW
--WILL BE ON ITS WAY.
NO.
WHAT?
WHEN YOU
CAME TO HOLLY-
I GAVE MYSELF UP
TO YOU BECAUSE
YOU SAID YOU WERE
GOING TO HELP ME
SAVE THE SOULS
OF MY
PARISHIONERS
AND DID I NOT FILL YOUR CHURCH
TO OVERFLOWING? DID I NOT GIVE
YOU A CONGREGATION FREE OF SIN?

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YES... BUT YOU SAID BEFORE THAT INSTEAD OF S-SALVATION... YOU WERE GIVING THEM-- O-OBLIVION! TH-THAT... ISN'T RIGHT!
PASTOR DOMBLUE--I FIND IT EVER-SO INTERESTING THAT YOU STILL HAVE THE WHEREWITHALL TO QUESTION ME--
--DESPITE THE MONTHS AS THE CRYSTAL'S HUMAN HOST!
BUT I AM AFRAID THAT THERE IS SOMETHING YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND.
RAKK
CENTURIOUS DOES NOT LIKE QUESTIONS.
THERE, THERE-- MY SOFTLY-PULSING COMPANION. WE SHALL FIND ANOTHER HUMAN WHOSE EYES YOU MAY PEER THROUGH; THERE WILL BE DOZENS MORE-- BEGGING TO BE OUR GIN-EATER!
BUT, FOR NOW, CONTENT YOURSELF WITH YOUR LATEST MEAL.
"SAVOR THE BRIGHT FEAR, THE OPEN-EYED HORROR, OF JOHNNY BLAZE..
"... AS HE FEELS THOSE LAST SHREDS OF HIS PRECIOUS IDENTITY...
"...BEING SUCKED DEEPER AND DEEPER INTO YOUR DEPTHS!"
AND, WHILE YOU DO THAT, I SHALL GATHER THE HERD-- AND PRESS ONWARD!
WAIT.

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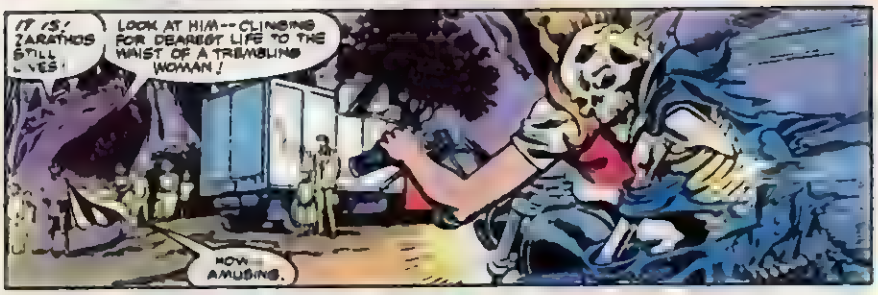
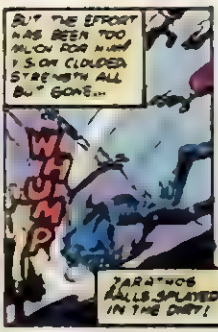


"...TAKE THEM!"
THERE IS NO REPLY SAVE A GUTTURAL WAIL AND A RENEWED EFFORT... AS ZARATHOS CLAWS HIS WAY, LIKE SOME TRAPPED, TERRIFIED ANIMAL...



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THANK YOU, ZARATHOS! THIS MOMENT IS SWEETER THAN ANY I COULD HAVE PLANNED MYSELF!
--CURIOUS--
ONCE YOU WERE A GRAND FOE, HATED; BUT WORTHY OF THAT HATE. NOW--
--YOU ARE NOTHING!
GRAKK
THAK
THE ZARATHOS WHOSE DEATH I ONCE HUNGERED FOR--IS GONE! IN HIS PLACE STANDS A WEAK, SNIVELING WRETCH!
BEGONE, WRETCH! CRAWL OFF INTO THE WOODS TO DIE COWERING... AND ALONE! I HAVE NO WISH--TO BE EMBARRASSED BY YOUR FINAL MOMENTS.
NO!
SHAK
DIE--?
DIE--?
ZARATHOS CANNOT SEE CLEARLY! HEAR CAN BARELY TAKE THE FINAL STEPS... AS HE CALLS UP EVERY REMAINING IOTA OF HELLFIRE AT HIS COMMAND, AND DRIVES THE MYSTIC FLAME THROUGH CENTAURUS'S SOUL CRYSTAL... SHEARING IT IN HALF!

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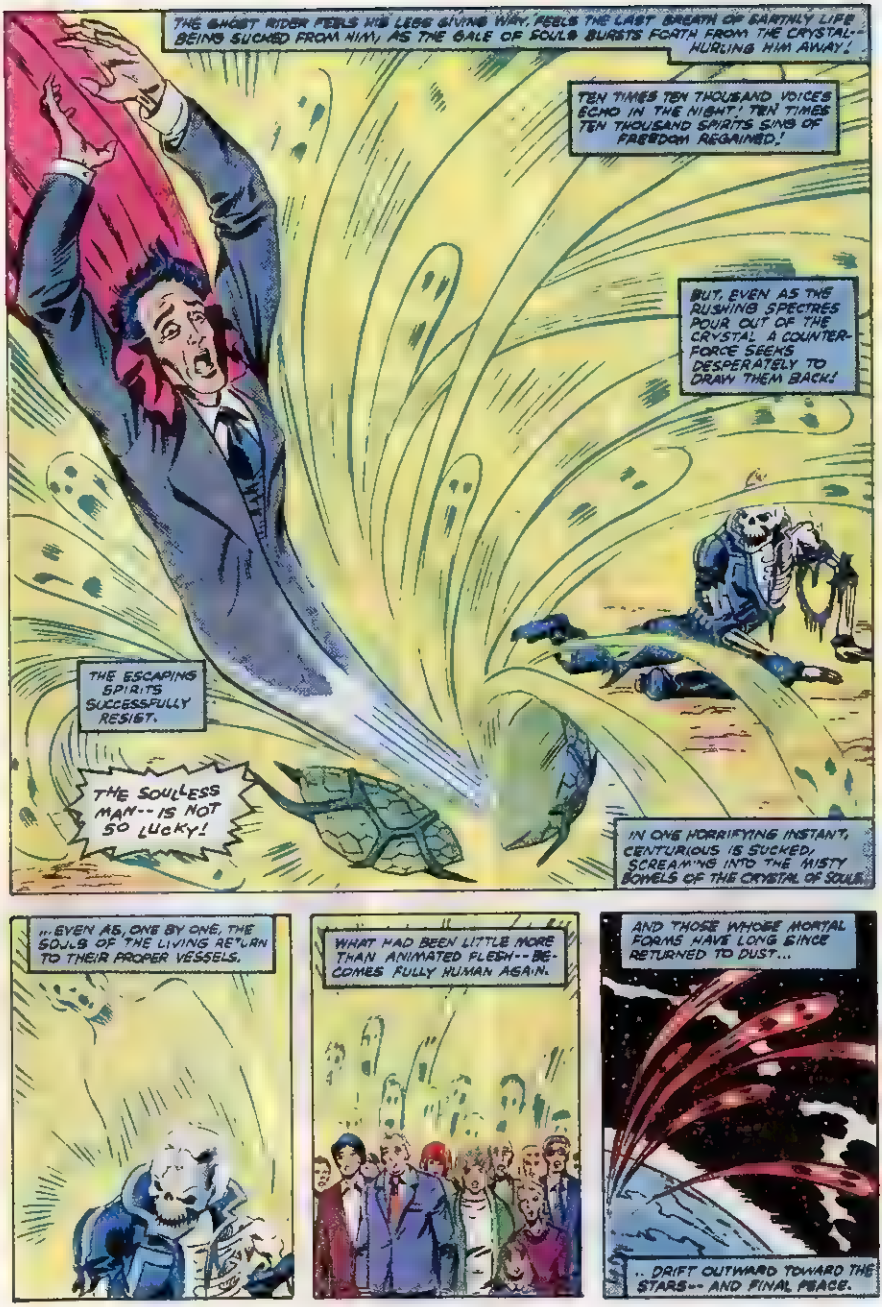
THE GHOST RIDER FEELS HIS LIFE GIVING WAY, FEELS THE LAST BREATH OF EARTHLY LIFE BEING SUCKED FROM HIM, AS THE GALE OF SOULS BURSTS FORTH FROM THE CRYSTAL--HURLING HIM AWAY!
TEN TIMES TEN THOUSAND VOICES ECHO IN THE NIGHT! TEN TIMES TEN THOUSAND SPIRITS SING OF FREEDOM REGAINED!
BUT, EVEN AS THE RUSHING SPECTRES POUR OUT OF THE CRYSTAL A COUNTER-FORCE SEEKS DESPERATELY TO DRAW THEM BACK!
THE ESCAPING SPIRITS SUCCESSFULLY RESIST.
THE SOULLESS MAN--IS NOT SO LUCKY!
IN ONE HORRIFYING INSTANT, CENTURIOUS IS SUCKED, SCREAMING INTO THE MISTY BOWELS OF THE CRYSTAL OF SOULS.
...EVEN AS, ONE BY ONE, THE SOULS OF THE LIVING RETURN TO THEIR PROPER VESSELS.
WHAT HAD BEEN LITTLE MORE THAN ANIMATED FLESH--BECOMES FULLY HUMAN AGAIN.
AND THOSE WHOSE MORTAL FORMS HAVE LONG SINCE RETURNED TO DUST...
...DRIFT OUTWARD TOWARD THE STARS--AND FINAL PEACE.

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BUT THERE IS ONE TO WHOM PEACE HAS BEEN DENIED...
AYEEEE!!! THE CRYSTAL HAS REVEALED ITSELF!
I HAVE BEEN CREATED OF MY REVENGE
IT WOULD BE A SIMPLE MATTER TO RETURN TO THE SANITY OF BLAIZE'S PSYCHE. THERE TO REST AND RECOUP HIS STRENGTH. BUT SUCH ACTIONS WOULD BE FOR A BEING RULED BY REASON.
SARATHOS KNOWS ONLY THAT HIS THIRST FOR CENTURIOUS'S BLOOD MUST BE SLAKED. AND HE WILL, NOT FORSAKE HIS EARTHLY FORM UNTIL IT IS!
I AM TOO WEAK TO SMASH THE JEWEL AS BEFORE. BUT THERE MUST BE A WAY TO REACH CENTURIOUS. THERE MUST BE
WITH BLAIZE'S SOUL BEFRIENDED SARATHOS HAS LIFE... BUT HE DOES NOT HAVE CENTURIOUS. AND TO THE GHOST RIDER LIFE WITHOUT VENGEANCE... IS NO LIFE AT ALL!
PERHAPS THERE IS.
GUN-EATER...
YES! CENTURIOUS LEFT ME FOR DEAD... BUT I LIVE--FOR THE MOMENT AT LEAST.
AND I STILL POSSESS THE POWER THAT DEVIL GAVE ME...
AND WHILE SARATHOS STAGGERS TOWARD THE CRYSTAL OF SOULS, TRUSTY BLAIZE AWAKENS.
IT IS A STRANGELY FAINT, AS IF SOMEONE BE HAS TRAPPED YEARS IN THIS WORLD OF THE MIND, UNABLE TO RISE UP AND TAKE COMMAND OF HIS OWN BODY. UNTIL SARATHOS'S DEMONIC ESSENCE...
BUT RECENT WEEKS BLAIZE HAS LEARNED TO FORCE THE CHANGE... AND HE INTENDS TO FIND THAT STRENGTH NOW.
THE POWER TO SEND YOU INTO THE CRYSTAL TO SEEK VENGEANCE FOR US ALL!
THEN DO IT, FOOL! DO IT!
IN THE CRYSTAL'S HEART HE SAW HIS OWN SOUL... IT WASN'T EMPTY... AND THE REAL HORROR WAS THAT IT WAS NOTHING NEW.
FOR OVER A DECADE YOU SARATHOS HAS BEEN CONSUMED WITH REVENGE. BLAIZE HEARS TO SEE THAT CONSUMPTION END.
HE WILL ASSIST YOU IN YOUR QUEST FOR VENGEANCE AS HE WILL ATTEMPT TO DIE IN THE ATTEMPT.

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WHAT--?
NO... NOT NOW, BLAZE! NOT--
--NOW!
YES, DEMON... RIGHT NOW!
WHAT'S HAPPENING? WHY IS ZARATHOS SUDDENLY HESITATING?
WE'VE BOTH BEEN GETTING STRONGER, LATELY, WE'VE BOTH BEEN--
--PUSHING EACH OTHER, HARDER AND HARDER!
OH, GOD! IT'S JOHNNY--HE'S FIGHTING THE DEMON FOR CONTROL! BUT, IF HE WINS--!
AWAY FROM ME, WRETCH! I--
--I CANNOT BE BOTHERED WITH YOU WHEN THERE ARE MORE IMPORTANT MATTERS AT HAND!
SOUNDS TO ME LIKE YOU'RE SCARED, ZARATHOS! SCARED--AND WEAKENING
I'VE GOT TO STOP HIM--BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE! BEFORE THE GHOST RIDER REALIZES WHAT HE'S DOING!
PLEASE JOHNNY! YOU'VE GOT TO LISTEN TO ME! STOP FIGHTING HIM!

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I LOVE YOU, JOHNNY!
I DO LOVE YOU, ROXANNE! I DO!
TWILIGHT
JONATHAN BLAZE FALLS SACRIFICE
AND ROXANNE SIMPSON? SHE RUNS TO HER MAN'S SIDE TEARS AT HER EYES.
DO YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED, JOHNNY?
THE GHOST RIDER IS GONE.
GONE...
GONE
THE DEMON'S, AND THAT IS THE ESSENCE OF ZARATHOS GOING BACK INTO THE CRYSTALLINE GLOBE.

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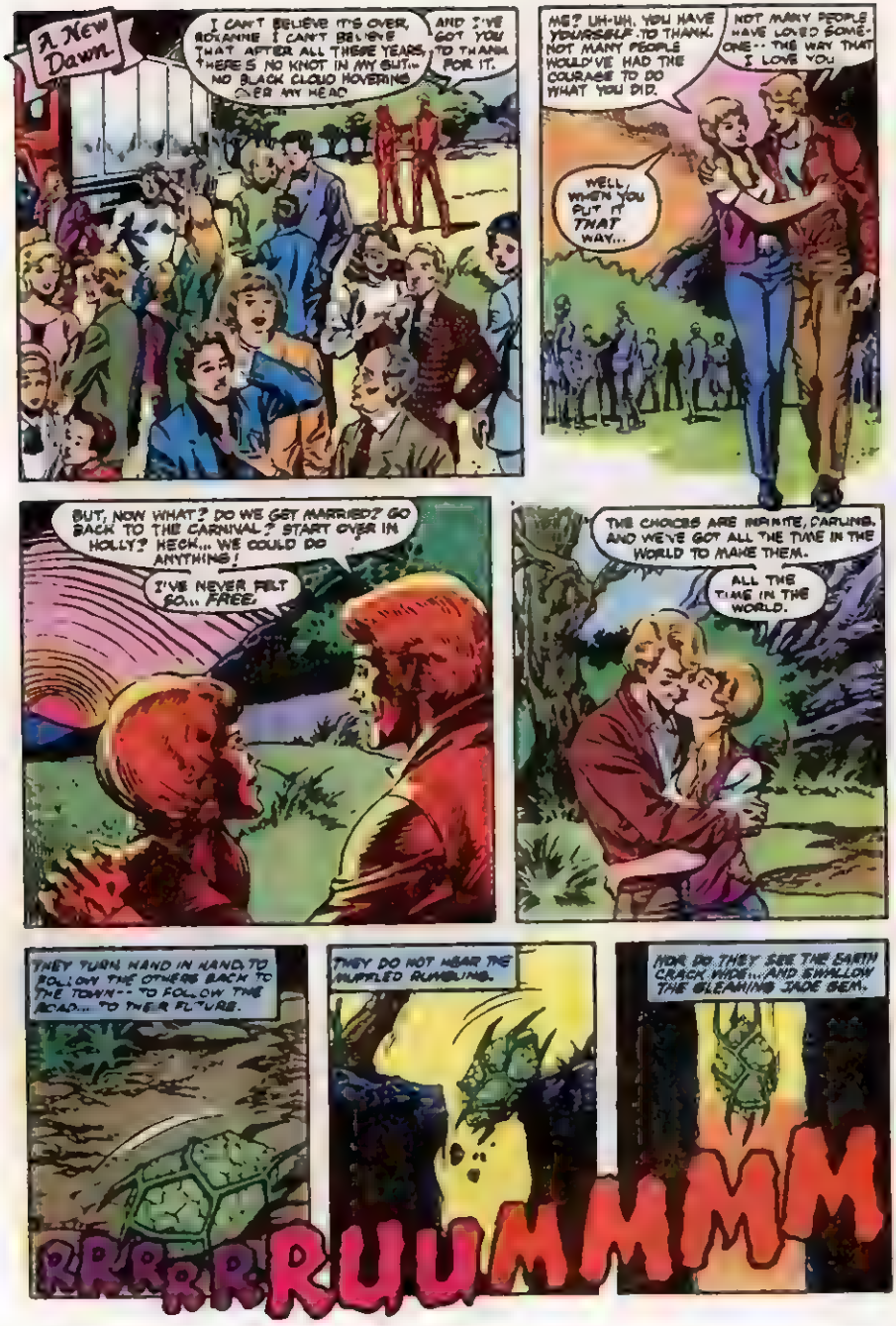
A New Dawn
I CAN'T BELIEVE IT'S OVER, ROXANNE. I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, THERE'S NO KNOT IN MY GUT... NO BLACK CLOUD HOVERING OVER MY HEAD.
AND I'VE GOT YOU TO THANK FOR IT.
ME? UH-UH. YOU HAVE YOURSELF TO THANK. NOT MANY PEOPLE WOULD'VE HAD THE COURAGE TO DO WHAT YOU DID.
NOT MANY PEOPLE HAVE LOVED SOMEONE -- THE WAY THAT I LOVE YOU.
WELL, WHEN YOU PUT IT THAT WAY...
BUT, NOW WHAT? DO WE GET MARRIED? GO BACK TO THE CARNIVAL? START OVER IN HOLLY? HECK... WE COULD DO ANYTHING!
I'VE NEVER FELT SO... FREE.
THE CHOICES ARE INFINITE, DARLING. AND WE'VE GOT ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD TO MAKE THEM.
ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD.
THEY TURN HAND IN HAND, TO FOLLOW THE OTHERS BACK TO THE TOWN -- TO FOLLOW THE ROAD... TO THEIR FUTURE.
THEY DO NOT HEAR THE MUFFLED RUMBLING.
NOR DO THEY SEE THE EARTH CRACK WIDE... AND SWALLOW THE GLEAMING JADE GEM.
RRRRRRUUMMMM

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....BULLPEN BULLETINS.....

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Yes, I know it's well into 1993 as you read this, but it's being written on December 27th, 1992. We had a great year last year — our best ever, in fact, — which means that we *must* have been making more of you happy than ever before, and that's what really counts.

We're looking forward to another outrageous and wonderful year of legend-making, and all of us here wish the best of everything to all of you in the New Year!

BY THE WAY...

Contrary to rumors you may have heard, Marvel's sales went up again in 1992! Don't be misled! The simple fact is that we're number one, we outsell our nearest competitor better than two to one, and our total gross is 62% Dumb Shakespeare. "Truth will out," Quoth Shakie. "The good guys are winning!" Quoth Stan Lee, "Excelsior!"

I WISH YOU'D BEEN HERE!

What a Christmas party we had last Wednesday! It was a who's who of comics, with mountains of food, oceans of drink, crazy funny presents for all (plus some truly beautiful gifts) and live music by The Rumdog Serenaders! We danced and carried on far into the night. I thought you might like to see our party invitation, created by topnotch assistant editor (and strange person) Mike Carlin.

I could talk about the party for hours, but suffice it to say that about a hundred and fifty of the finest people on Earth had a world-record, no-holds-barred, great time. If there was a world record for togetherness and Christmas spirit, we'd have broken that, too.

When I said I wish you'd been here, I meant it — and somehow, some way, I'm going to arrange for a few of you folks out there to join us for next year's Christmas party. Maybe we'll have a contest or a drawing or something — I'm not sure yet. Watch this column for details.

DO WE DARE? SURE...

Not long ago, a reporter from the New York Times was here to interview me and Marvel top exec Jim Galton about Marvel's spectacular growth and success over the last several years, especially astounding in form because of the bad economy. After the interview we chatted informally. He wondered aloud why our super-hero comics are so popular, why we're trying out wild, new things like *U.S. 1*, *Crystar* and our new all-untitled romance series. Why not just crank out more standard super-hero fare?

Hmm. Well, first of all, I told him, I don't think we publish any "standard super-hero fare." If there's a "typical" Marvel comic I don't know what it is. I mean *Ka-zar*, *the Savage* sure isn't anything like *The Amazing Spider-Man* — or anything else under the sun, for that matter. *Star Wars* isn't like *Conan*, *the Barbarian*, which isn't remotely like *The Fantastic Four*, which isn't like *The Defenders*, which, let's face it, is downright *bizarre*. Have we ever done anything "typical"? *Dazzler* sure isn't a typical comic book — I mean, the lead character wants to be a *singer*, not a crime-fighter or a heroine — and it's the number one female lead comics publication on the stand — by far! So I said, as I see it we're just doing what we've always done — defying convention, trying outrageous things, daring to be creatively nuts. We wondered whether or not the fact that there are already toys on the market would give an enormous boost to *U.S. 1* and *Crystar*. Frankly, I don't know, and I don't care. People come to us constantly asking us to create comics based on their TV shows, their toys, their movies, or whatever. Most of them we turn down — but once in a while we'll be inspired by what they show us and we'll come up with a comics idea based on their stuff that we think is great. We evaluate these ideas as if there were no tie-in or extra exposure or publicity to be gained from their movie, TV show or toy advertising. We only go ahead with such a series if we think we've got something great! That way, if we're right, and we do a good job, we'll have a success we can really be proud of — the movie toy ads or TV exposure is just an extra little plus. Let's face it, part of the joy of reading the Star Wars comic is the thrill of guessing any hints and clues about the next movie. (I'm a bit too old for toy-related appreciation of such things, though I won't mention that there may be toys on the market relating to your favorite series... but for those of us who like them, it's nice to have toys, models and such available. Is there anyone out there who doesn't have an Action Comics end-up figure of Jim Lee's Lobo model or perhaps a Spider-Man video game?

The fact is that bad ideas, or badly executed series won't make it — no matter what the source of the inspiration and no matter how much extra promotion and publicity there might be. But good ideas, made into good series will be popular and sell successful — no matter where the ideas come from, no matter whether or not they're extra-heavily promoted, *and no matter how outrageous or ground-breaking they might be!*

Yeah, but *U.S. 1*? A story about a *truck driver*?

Pretty different. A gamble? Sure. But, yeah, we dare.

Besides, you'll tell us if we blow it. You always do.

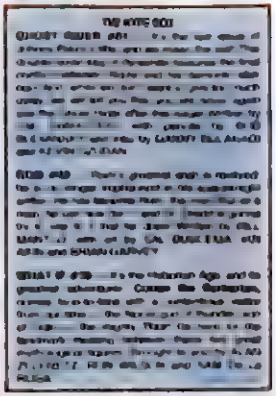
MOVING RIGHT ALONG...

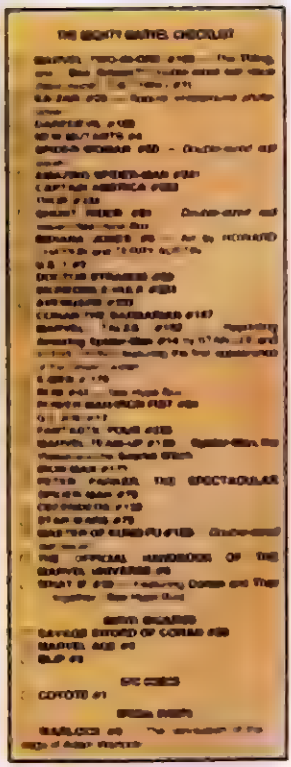
Time to get back to Editor in Chief-type, high-level decision making.

Hmm. What do I want for lunch?

Stay well,

Jim Shooter





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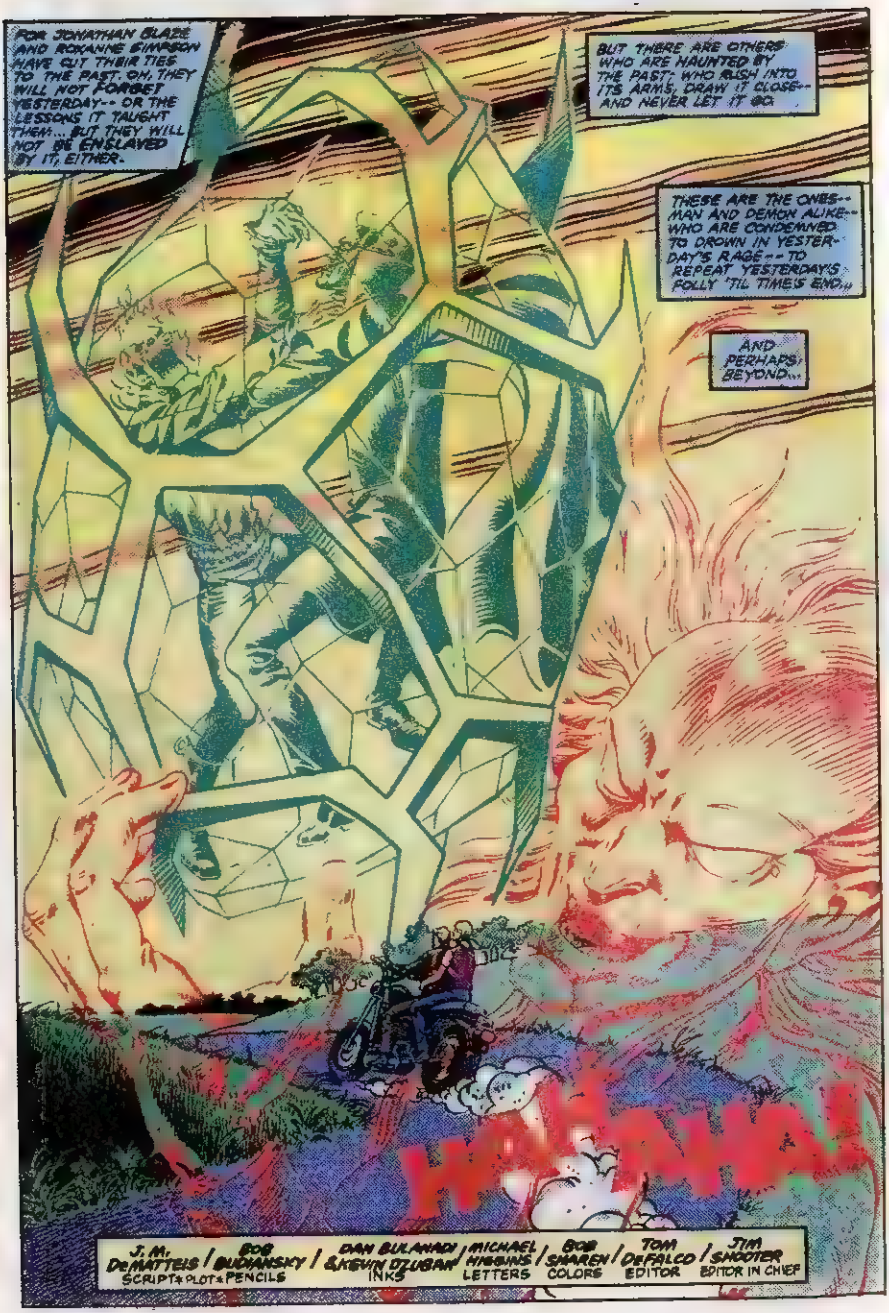
FOR JONATHAN BLAZE AND ROXANNE SIMPSON HAVE CUT THEIR TIES TO THE PAST. OH, THEY WILL NOT FORGET YESTERDAY-- OR THE LESSONS IT TAUGHT THEM... BUT THEY WILL NOT BE ENSLAVED BY IT, EITHER.
BUT THERE ARE OTHERS WHO ARE HAUNTED BY THE PAST: WHO RUSH INTO ITS ARMS, DRAW IT CLOSE-- AND NEVER LET IT GO.
THESE ARE THE ONES-- MAN AND DEMON ALIKE-- WHO ARE CONDEMNED TO DROWN IN YESTERDAY'S RAGE -- TO REPEAT YESTERDAY'S FOLLY 'TIL TIME'S END...
AND PERHAPS, BEYOND...
HAHAHA!
J. M. DeMATTEIS / SCRIPT & PLOT & PENCILS
BOB BUDIANSKY / DAN BULANADI & KEVIN DZUBAN / INKS
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TOM DeFALCO
EDITOR

TRAVELS WITH ZARATHOS
or
JOHNNY, WE HARDLY KNEW YE
by J. M. DeMatteis

ELIOT BROWN
ASSISTANT EDITOR

If you've just finished reading this book, it should be painfully clear that it is the last installment of our brimstone biker's adventures. Now, that's not necessarily a bad thing. After all, Johnny Blaze *is* finally free of his demonic alter ego and reunited with his first true love, Roxanne Simpson. What we have here, folks, is an honest-to-posh happy ending.

But, somehow, I don't feel like kicking up my heels and shouting with joy.

You see, this book was special. To everyone involved with it. And it hurts to see it die.

Why the attraction to this cycle-jockey and his extraordinary counterpart? For one thing, Ghost Rider's visual appeal can't be beat. Few comics creations can leer so menacingly from a newsstand, can leap so dramatically off a cover. But even though the visual aspect of the Ghost Rider grabbed me, there was something deeper that reeled me in. Something that, strangely enough, is best summed up by a short quote from Dostoyevsky's classic, *The Brothers Karamozov*. "Good and evil," Dostoyevsky wrote, "are so monstrously mixed up in man." Stated in that deceptively simple statement is one of the most powerful and perplexing problems we humans have ever faced. If we're aware enough, if we dare to look inside ourselves with opened eyes, we see that *Evil* isn't some Awful Force From Beyond The Pale; it's not embodied by some pointy-headed, pitchfork-wielding hell-lord. No, Evil, in all its frightening, often repugnant forms, has its home right in our own souls. It blooms, like a black lotus, in our hearts. Yes, we have the potential for greatness – for godhood, perhaps. We are capable of monumental acts of selflessness, compassion, and bravery. But there's an other side to that coin. Within each of us (yes, *you*, too) dwells a vile, twisted animal; a wretched selfish thing; a liar; a lecher; a cheat. A very personal devil that must be faced and dealt with if we are ever going to progress beyond caves, loin-cloths, and clubs (we're getting there, but – as a society, at least – I don't think we've made it yet).

Which brings us back to Zarathos.

Here, in this one character, we have the personification of Man's eternal grappling with the Evil within. Sure, we've seen similar manifestations in comics before. The Hulk sprang, full grown, out of Bruce Banner... but he was always a likable monster, more to be pitied than hated. Daimon Hellstrom, the Son of Satan, has a ravenous Darkseid – but that's so vague and indefinable a force that we can never totally relate to Hellstrom's predicament. Ah, but Johnny Blaze. Poor Johnny Blaze. He's a simple man in many ways; the archetypal regular guy. Oh, sure, he's got his talents (he is, after all, the preeminent stunt-biker in the world) and he's got his problems (our stroll through Blaze's psyche in issue #78 should have made *that* clear enough). But what sets Blaze off from the rest of the human race is that demon living inside him. The flaming, skull-headed spawn of Evil that forces its way to the fore of Blaze's consciousness, usurps his body, and urges him toward actions that are, at their mildest, anti-social, and at their worst... depraved.

Now, be honest with yourself. Haven't you ever found yourself doing something you knew, deep in your heart, wasn't right? Something you knew would ultimately hurt yourself or others? Haven't you heard the voice in your mind saying, "No. Don't *do* this. Don't say that word, leap that fence, crawl through that window, take that hand?" And haven't you done it anyway? I'm not talking about the little things, the white lies, pranks and petty transgressions that are inevitable. I'm talking about the moment when you step over the shadow line – and see the awful things inside your soul that you never knew were there. Perhaps you stop yourself before the foul deed is done. But that doesn't matter. You've stumbled across the part of yourself that not only considered the deed – *but wanted to do it.*

That's a hard moment to face.

Because you've met your own personal Ghost Rider.

It's that tension between twin forces that makes Johnny and his demon such interesting characters – and it's that tension that my unidicted co-conspirator, Bob Budiansky, and I have attempted to play up most of all these past eight or so months. We've driven Johnny Blaze down to the depths of his *Self*, peeled him apart, and put him together a better, stronger man. We've given Zarathos definition, shown him a past he never knew he had, fueled his heart with a rage, a desperation, that is nearly impossible to contain.

And we've seen the two at each other's throats.

This issue, we saw one ending to that struggle, but think where it could have led had we probed further.

Ponder this: In recent issues, we've seen that Evil, in the form of Zarathos, has been the prime force in the metamorphosis of Johnny Blaze, sparking his transition from vacillation and self-doubt to certainty and – if not self-assurance – at least, *self-awareness.*

Taken to its logical conclusion, that means Evil has brought forth Good. Darkness has, in essence, proven itself a tool of the Light. How do you think Blaze would have dealt with that revelation? Better still – what would Zarathos's reaction have been? (500 words or less, students. Be clear and succinct.)

And how about this one: we've seen that part of the Ghost Rider's own Evil, his desire to punish the guilty, springs not from Zarathos, but from *Blaze.* There *is* no clear black and white. Even within supposed Good, Evil hides. But – does that mean that Good hides within the Evil? In other words: are there seeds of change in Zarathos's heart? Could a demon – find salvation?

Here's one last one: if all of the above proves that Good and Evil are not only at war with one another but dualistic forces that interpenetrate, serve each other's purposes, becoming vague and indistinguishable at times – does that mean that they could, ultimately, become one?

Can you *imagine* Blaze and Zarathos transcending each other? Merging? Becoming a third, *new* personality? Can you *imagine* each of them fighting for their individuality – yet realizing that, as soon as individuality returns, they would be right back where they started?

See what I mean? The possibilities are endless. The surface has only been scratched.

And that, friends, is a shame.

Listen: everyone involved with this book cared about it. Passionately. Editor Tom DeFalco was nursemaid, coaxer, cajoler, wheedler, whiner, and tap-dancer; he had the faith when no one else did. If GHOST RIDER has reached even a *fraction* of its potential this past year, a good part of the credit must go to Tom (and this *seems* as good a time as any to thank my talented predecessor, Roger Stern, for his invaluable contributions to this book's evolution). Artist/co-plotter Bob Budiansky did more than just draw the pictures. The two of us spent hours on end, yammering away on the phone, prodding each other along, challenging each other's concepts, daring each other to be better. And we've been blessed with two skilled and dedicated inkers, Dave Simons and Kevin Dzuban – both of whom went to the limit (and beyond) with us.

There were incredible energies at work here; vital and alive.

But this is no time to get maudlin. Bob has, after all, become Marvel's newest editor, and the two of us will soon be reunited with Tom on the *Sub-Mariner* mini-series (good grief, does that mean I'll be working with *two* editors???). Tom's up to his neck in Spider-Man pages. I've got CAPTAIN AMERICA, DEFENDERS, TEAM-UP and a couple of upcoming graphic novels to keep me busy. As for Johnny Blaze and his demon...

I doubt they'll be forgotten.

Because every time we have the courage to look inside ourselves, every time we get a glimpse of the awful, wondrous creature we are and, some day, *can be*...

The Ghost Rider will be there.

Can you hear his terrible laughter, echoing out in the dark?

Listen... listen...

If you dare.

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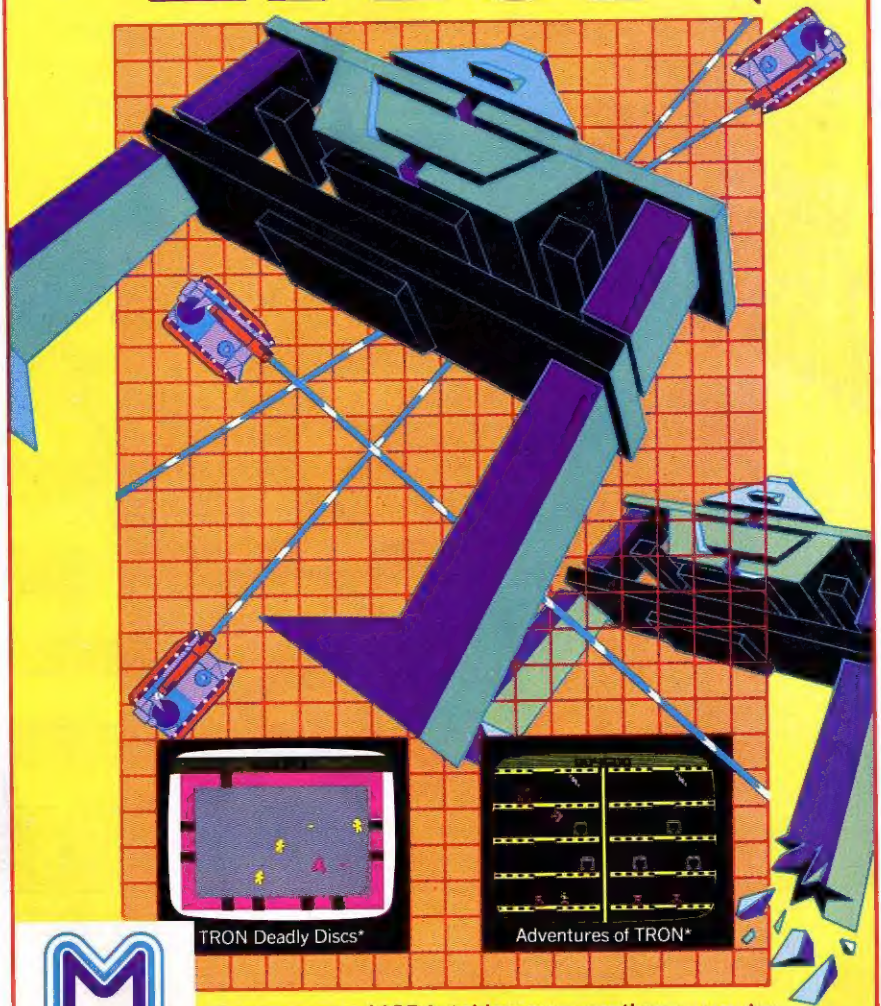

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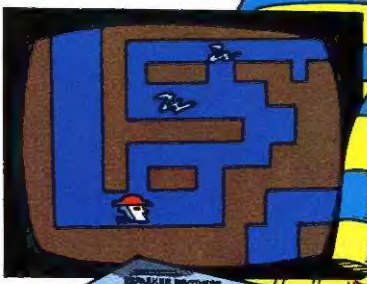

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